

Book Review: States and Social Movements

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Clara Volintiru reviews Hank Johnston's timely book on the mechanics of social movements, which may help explain why and how the events of Arab Spring have come to a head.

States & Social Movements. Hank Johnston. [Polity](#). February 2011.

Starting in December 2010, a wave of popular uprisings in the Middle East began to unfold. The general surprise with which most of the world took notice of the fall of such long-term regimes as Ben Ali and Mubarak, and the violent contestation of half a dozen other rulers in the region, proved just how little we know about the underlying dynamics and trajectories of social movements. Since the revolutions of '89, it couldn't have been a more propitious timing for a book attempting to explain why and how such events come to pass.

[Hank Johnston](#)'s book *States & Social Movements* is not only timely, but also timeless, as it presents a blueprint of political protest that is equally relevant for the 18th century Western states, as for the globalised world of today. The author, a specialist in contentious politics, has previously edited a collection of qualitative enquiries of the cultural themes behind popular protest – [Culture, Social Movements and Protests](#).

The current volume adopts a more ambitious perspective, accounting for both the cultural and the structural factors shaping popular political contention. Complementary to his previous work, he focuses much more on the structural analysis, being mainly concerned with the political context, rather than with the framing processes through which protest occurs.

The subject is the relationship between states and protests. It accounts for both democratic, as well as repressive political contexts, dating from pre-modern to contemporary times. Such a wide coverage of statist forms provides convincing support to the book's basic premise: social movements always occur in the context of the state. Johnston sees the state itself as being inherently contentious: "an arena where conflicting interests of political elites, economic elites, state elites – the bureaucrats and civil servants that make it up – plus the additional element of popular pressure play themselves out in undetermined ways to produce particular configurations of state institutions". Thus, his perspective shows us how institutionalised and non-institutionalised politics shapes and is in turn shaped by the governing form.

The book, structured in six thematic chapters, evocatively starts with a focus on the statist setting of protest, and ends with the contemporary globalised context. In between, it deals with specificities of popular action in contemporary democracies in general, and in western cases in particular, with oppressive regimes, and with revolutions, as one of the most drastic forms of protest. In the setting of contemporary democracies, the author explores the political process that leads to protest, as well as the dynamics of contention. In another chapter, Johnston takes on the issue of 'social movement societies' portraying the reasons and consequences of an institutionalisation of protest in western democracies. Further more, on the topic of repressive states, he nuances the different degrees of oppression towards protest, by explaining how "repression often reflects strategic evaluation of the threat posed by the protest or by individual activists". The last two chapters, concerning revolutions and the implications of globalisation on social movements, are more empirically focused, thus providing a good, demonstrative finality to the volume.

Following on the steps of Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol whose work is often cited in the book, Johnston leaves us with a good understanding of the possible sequences of social movements. Another strength of the volume is that it helps us make sense of the relationships between the different types of rule and the manner in which protest is manifested. A weak point would be the lack of an introductory chapter, or a conclusion. Because of this, we only have an overall idea of what the book it's about after we've finished reading it. The volume also leaves us wanting for more detail, more case-specific explanations of some of the numerous social movements that have occurred in the contemporary times. Still, *States and Social Movements* is a very good starting point for any reader curious to understand the causes, forms and functions of popular protest.

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